Poverty in the Soviet Union: The Life-Styles of the Under-Privileged in Recent Years by Mervyn Matthews
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Matthews, Mervyn. *Poverty in the Soviet Union: the Life-Styles of the Under-Privileged in Recent Years*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne, 1986. xv +227 pp. Tables. Bibliography. Appendixes. Index. £22.50; £7.95 (paperback).

In this study, Mervyn Matthews attempts to estimate the scale of poverty in the Soviet Union, to examine the conditions under which the poor live and illuminate some of the problems that they face. It is based on an extensive study of materials published in the USSR, on the work of other western scholars and on interviews with a sample of recent émigrés. As is true of much of Matthews's previous work, the present study focuses upon an important social problem. It provides a great deal of empirical material that other scholars, students and even the general reader can examine with profit. But, like his earlier study on privilege, *Poverty in the Soviet Union* suffers from the absence of an adequate conceptual framework. The author does not appear to have understood the concepts and definitions used by other sociologists in the study of poverty and this results in a lack of focus in the work under review. It is also marred by occasional errors of fact.

Put rather simply, analysts distinguish between absolute and relative conceptions of poverty. The former involves specifying some minimum quantities of food, clothing, shelter and so forth necessary for subsistence; this has proved difficult and, in any case, does not capture the phenomenon of social deprivation. As a result, attention has concentrated upon relative poverty: access to resources so limited as to prevent the enjoyment of a style of life accepted as appropriate by the society in question. This definition reduces poverty to inequality. In his introductory chapter, Dr Matthews describes these two concepts and introduces a third, that of an 'impoverished lifestyle'; he sets out some of the reasons why absolute conceptions of poverty are inappropriate and suggests that he will operate with a relative definition. But in subsequent chapters he reverts to an implicit absolute standard: for example, he claims that some 58 per cent of wage-earners received less than the 'poverty wage' in 1979 (p. 26). From a relativist standpoint, this is nonsense; if such a high proportion of the labour force receive a wage of 140 rubles a month or less, generally accepted social values will prescribe a lifestyle that can be maintained on such an income.

More generally, Matthews makes frequent reference to the levels achieved 'in the west' or 'in the USA' and draws the inference that, judged by these standards, Soviet poverty is worse than he is suggesting. Again, from a relativist point of view, the incomes achieved in the USA are largely irrelevant in the determination of social standards — and hence social deprivation — in the USSR. If the intention is to provide implicit comparisons of inequality or of the impact of different social priorities, then it is more appropriate to choose 'Western' countries with a per-capita income approximately the same as that of the USSR — say, Italy or Japan.

Such comparisons might have been illuminating in the context of Matthews's third conception of 'poverty'. This is perhaps the most interesting conceptual innovation in the book; but it is not developed very fully. What the author appears to be asserting is that we may regard people as poor (and,

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possibly, people will regard themselves as poor) if they are unable to acquire the appurtenances of 'modern life'. In this conception, poverty is equivalent to unsatisfied expectations. It appears that such expectations are influenced (if not formed) by consumption possibilities in advanced industrial societies, and by modern communications which spread knowledge of them. Dr Matthews appears to claim that such legitimate expectations are frustrated by the production priorities of the Soviet government imposed through central planning. But none of these ideas is properly worked out; nor is evidence adduced to show how much more impoverished are the lifestyles of peasants or unskilled workers in the USSR than, say, those of Sicilian peasants or those who live in the slums of Naples.

The book also lacks an adequate theory of social dynamics to explain the emergence and persistence of particular socio-economic groups. As a result, the author finds it difficult to distinguish between poverty and the natural consequences of social stratification: inequality in access to resources. Empirical analysis in such circumstances is likely to degenerate into the collection of a rag-bag of information about different social groups at the bottom end of the income scale; the reader does not know how significant particular elements are or how much importance the author attaches to them. Indeed, the whole exercise runs the risk of degenerating into the collection of sticks with which to beat the authorities in Moscow. This is a risk that Dr Matthews has not altogether avoided.

Finally, I must include a word about Dr Matthews's bizarre use of English: he writes of menials (p. 31), of rustic toilers (p. 117), of the lower orders (p. 129), of exploited folk (p. 138). Is this the normal language in which social stratification is discussed in the sociology department at the University of Surrey? Do its demographers refer to population totals as so many million souls (p. 42), or the labour force as consisting of toilers (pp. 29, 107, 138)? I think not. And I doubt whether Matthews himself would use such a vocabulary when writing of Britain or the USA; these terms are no longer part of the lexicon of social science. Their use in respect of the USSR is irritating as well as imprecise.

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THE question of legitimacy has preoccupied analysts of the German Democratic Republic, including this reviewer, since early in its history. The East

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